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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the family environment of 19 noninstitutionalized learning disabled children (mean age 12 years). Parents of Ss completed a demographic data form and the Family Environment Scale (FES), a published inventory which assesses the social climate of a family. A major finding was the lack of any significant stress or disorder. Families were characterized by a substantially below average score on conflict, by a strong emphasis on ethical and religious values, by a below average emphasis on active recreation, and by a moderate emphasis on family cohesion and support. The mean incongruence score indicated a greater agreement in perceived family climate than was typical of the standardization sample. FES profiles are appended. (SB)

The Family Environment of the Learning Disabled

Child: An Objective Description

by

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Presented at the Council for Exceptional Children,
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Child: An Objective Description

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A multiplicity of research has attempted to investigate the characteristics of the learning disabled child (Hallahan and Cruickshank, 1973). A search of the literature, however, reveals a surprising lack of studies investigating the relationship between environmental factors and learning disability. Ames (1968), for example, calls for the investigation of the learning disabled child as a "total organism" yet fails to emphasize that a child grows and develops in an environment. Full understanding of the child must include the environment in which the child functions. Caldwell (1967) notes that in understanding a child, the measurement of the environment is equally as important as the measurement of the developmental processes themselves. Existing investigations of the environment, however, have concentrated on deprivation in the physical environment and its effects on the child's development (Bernstein, 1961; Cravioto, Gaona, and Birch, 1967; Pavenstedt, 1965). Equally or more important, it would seem, is the social/interpersonal environment in which the child develops, particularly the child's relationship to his/her parents (Hallahan and Cruickshank, 1971). Of particular interest is the documented influence of parenting style on later school performance

(Barton, Dielman, Cattell, 1974; Baumrind, 1971; Bing, 1963).

A consideration which is seldom directly addressed in the literature, however, is the fact that parenting style is not expressed in a vacuum. Particularly for the young child, the expression of parenting style takes place, for the most part, within the wider context of the family. Several investigations have addressed this issue in global terms e.g. Walberg and Marjoribanks (1973) found that the quality of the child's home environment predicted verbal and non-verbal abilities better than the families' SES. Other studies have found similar results (Baumrind and Black, 1967; Moore, 1967). The present study investigated the family environment of a sample of 19 non-institutionalized learning disabled children. The results provide a preliminary objective assessment of family style in this group of exceptional children.

Subjects

Subjects for the study were the families of 19 learning disabled children. These children were diagnosed as learning disabled by certified School Psychologists in the local Illinois school system. Mean age of the children was 12.1 years. All families were intact, although 21% of the families contained an adoptive or stepfather while 16% contained an adoptive or stepmother. All families resided in a rural or semi-rural area and the modal family income was \$12,000 - \$16,000 per year.

Method

Parents of learning disabled children independently completed a demographic data form and the Family Environment Scale (FES). The FES (Moos, 1974) is a published inventory which assesses the social climate of a family. The FES focuses

on the measurement and description of 1) interpersonal relationships among family members, 2) on the directions of personal growth which are emphasized in the family and 3) on the basic organizational structure of the family. The 10 individual scales and descriptions of what they measure appear in Table 1.

The FES is completed by one or more family members. The profile of scores from one individual may be used as a description of the family environment in which the individual lives. Additionally, when scores are available from more than one family member (as they were in this study i.e. from both parents) the individual scores of the two or more members are used to compute a Family Incongruence Score. While the tendency is for different family members to view their family environment similarly, the Incongruence Score quantifies the lack of agreement when it exists and provides additional information about the perception by one or more individuals. The FES is scored by converting the raw scale score to a T-score (mean = 50, SD = 10) using the manual. The responses of a standardization sample of 285 families were used as the norm group for the T-score conversions. The completed profile serves to generate a description of the family and also provides a characterization of the family dynamics in comparison to the norms of the standardization sample.

FES's were scored for each of the 19 mother/father pairs. Mean scale scores were used to construct a group mean profile based on the 19 families (Figure 1). In addition, independent mean profiles were obtained for the mothers and fathers in order to compute a mean incongruence score.

Results and Discussion

The mean family environment profile for the 19 families is reported in Figure 1. Perhaps most striking is the lack of any significant stress or dis-

order. In the perception of the parents, the family environment is, on the whole, good. These families are characterized by a substantially below average score on Conflict ($T = 38.6$) indicating that conflictual interactions and open expression of anger or aggression are infrequent. The families as a whole exhibit a strong emphasis on ethical and religious values ($T = 60.1$) which is consistent with rural norms. Overall there is a below average emphasis on active recreation ($T = 40.4$) and a moderate emphasis on family cohesion and support ($T = 54.8$). Organization and clarity of family rules and responsibilities are emphasized ($T = 56.7$) and the parents view the family as representing a fairly rigid system for control on the individual family member.

Inspection of the mean FES profiles for the mothers and fathers (Figures 2 and 3) reveals a striking agreement in the perception of the family environment. The mean incongruence score ($T = 45$) for the parents of these learning disabled children indicates a greater agreement in perceived family climate than was typical of the standardization sample.

Applications

The results of this study are striking in that the degree of disorganization in the families of these learning disabled children is substantially less than was initially predicted on the basis of reported research with related exceptional child populations (Erikson, 1968, 1969; Miller and Keirn, 1978). In addition, this study illustrates, for School Psychologists and teachers, the utility of the FES in measuring the home environment of learning disabled children. In school and clinic settings such information can be of significant value in directing families and/or their learning disabled child to the most appropriate form of treatment (Abrams and Kaslow, 1977). Inspection of several profiles will illustrate this value. The combined profile of Family 1 (Figure 4)

for example, is characterized by a significant lack of family cohesion ($T = 27$) and open expression of feelings ($T = 34$), and approximately a mean level of control ($T = 54$). The inspection of the individual profiles, however, reveals some notable discrepancies, most importantly the differing parental perceptions of the families independence and control dimensions. The mother (Figure 5) views the family environment as one which emphasizes a high level of control ($T = 67$) and a low level of independence for individual family members ($T = 28$). The father (Figure 6) shows an inverse pattern, with perceptions of a lack of emphasis on control ($T = 40$) and a high degree of emphasis on the independence of family members ($T = 61$).

The combined profile of Family 2 (Figure 7) also masks notable differences in parental perceptions of the family climate. The discrepancies are most apparent in the expressiveness, independence and control dimensions, with the mother (Figure 8) viewing the family as emphasizing a high level of control ($T = 73$) and cohesion ($T = 64$), and a low level of independence for family members ($T = 20$). The father, on the other hand, views the family as significantly less controlling ($T = 51$), with more emphasis on independence ($T = 45$), and less cohesiveness ($T = 48$), than the mother.

These sample profiles illustrate the utility of the FES in understanding the dynamics of the individual family with a learning disabled child. Armed with this understanding, families in need of supportive interventions can be identified and directed to appropriate forms of treatment before the onset of significant family distress and its resultant negative impact on the learning disabled child.

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TABLE 1

A Brief Description of FES Scales

Relationship Dimensions

Cohesion - The extent to which family members are concerned and committed to the family and the degree to which family members are helpful and supportive of each other.

Expressiveness - The extent to which family members are allowed and encouraged to act openly and to express their feelings directly.

Conflict - The extent to which the open expression of anger and aggression and generally conflictual interactions are characteristic of the family.

Personal Growth Dimensions

Independence - The extent to which family members are encouraged to be assertive, self-sufficient, to make their own decisions and to think things out for themselves.

Achievement Orientation - The extent to which different types of activities (i.e., school and work) are cast into an achievement oriented or competitive framework.

Intellectual-Cultural Orientation - The extent to which the family is concerned about political, social, intellectual and cultural activities.

Active Recreational Orientation - The extent to which the family participates actively in various kinds of recreational and sporting activities.

Moral-Religious Emphasis - The extent to which the family actively discusses and emphasizes ethical and religious issues and values.

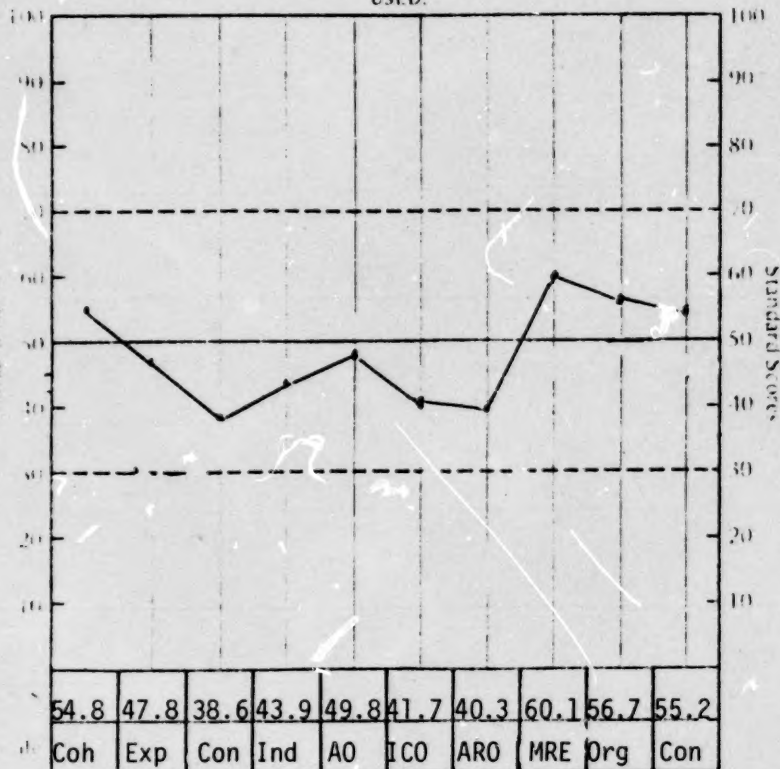
System Maintenance Dimensions

Organization - Measures how important order and organization is in the family in terms of structuring the family activities, financial plannings and explicitness and clarity in regard to family rules and responsibilities.

Control - Assesses the extent to which the family is organized in a hierarchical manner, the rigidity of family rules and procedures and the extent to which family members order each other around.

SOCIAL CLIMATE SCALE PROFILE OF Families of Learning Disabled Children

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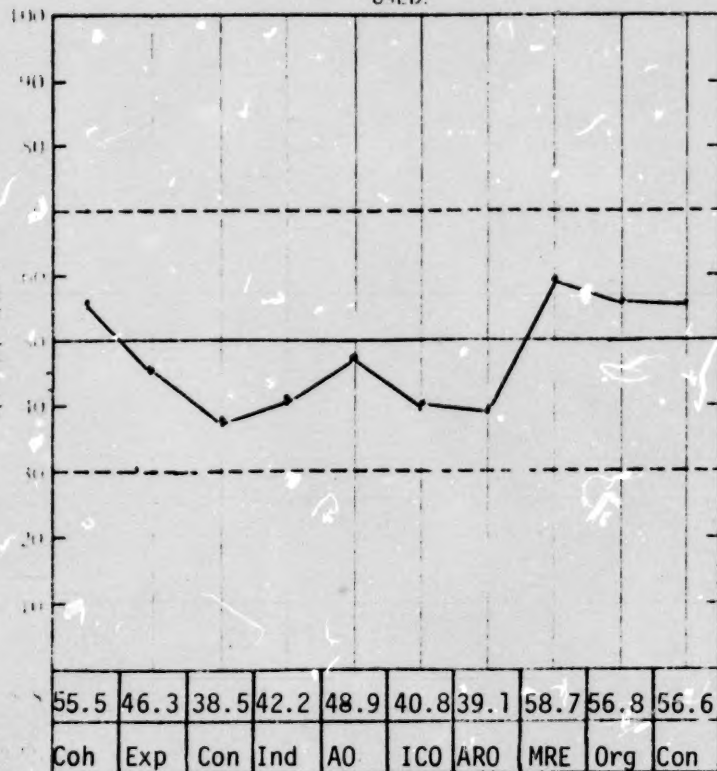
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Figure 1: Mean Family Environment Scale Profile

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SOCIAL CLIMATE SCALE PROFILE OF Mothers of Learning Disabled Children

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Figure 2: Mean Family Environment Scale Profile: Mothers

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SOCIAL CLIMATE SCALE PROFILE OF Fathers of Learning Disabled Children

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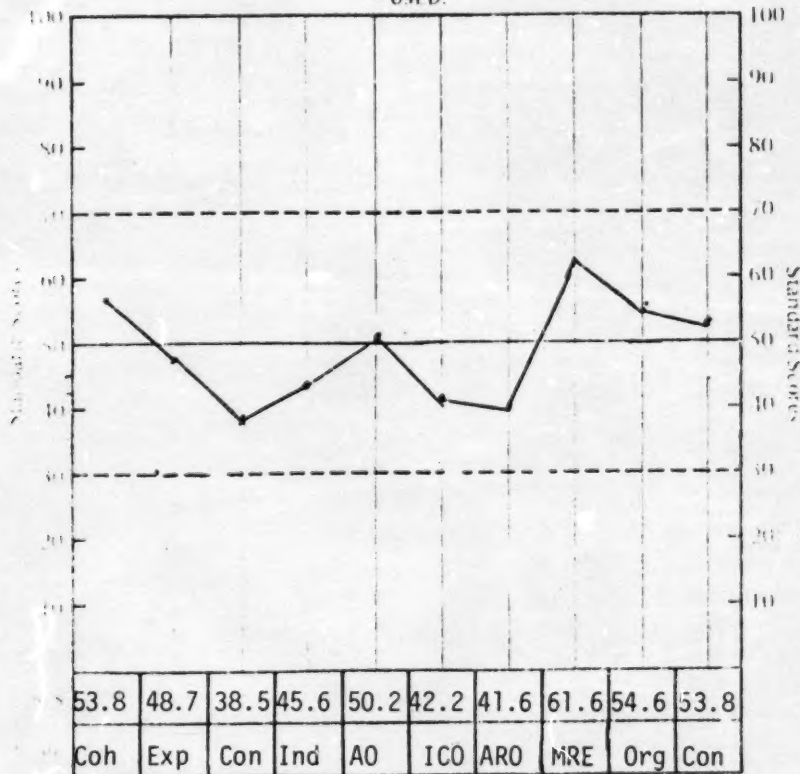
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Figure 3: Mean Family Environment Scale Profile: Fathers

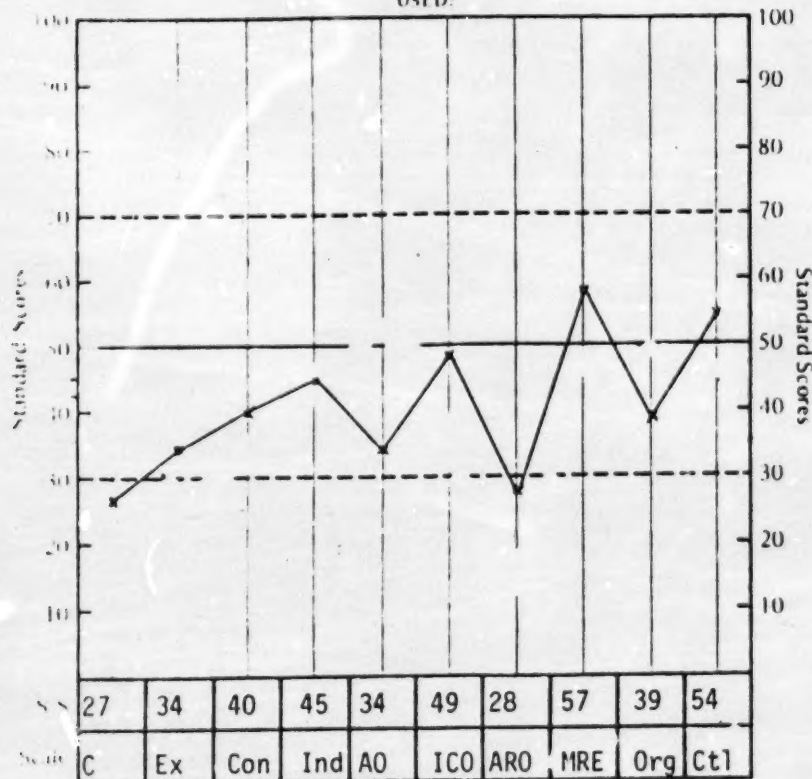
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SOCIAL CLIMATE SCALE PROFILE OF

Family 1-Combined

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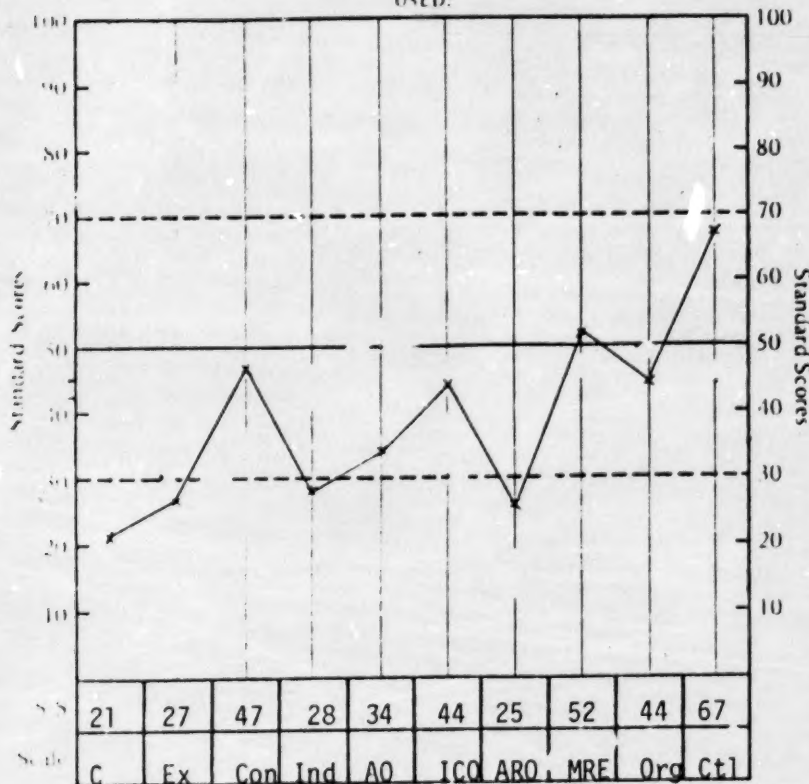
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Figure 4 : Combined Family Environment Scale Profile: Family 1

SOCIAL CLIMATE SCALE PROFILE OF

Family 1 - Mother

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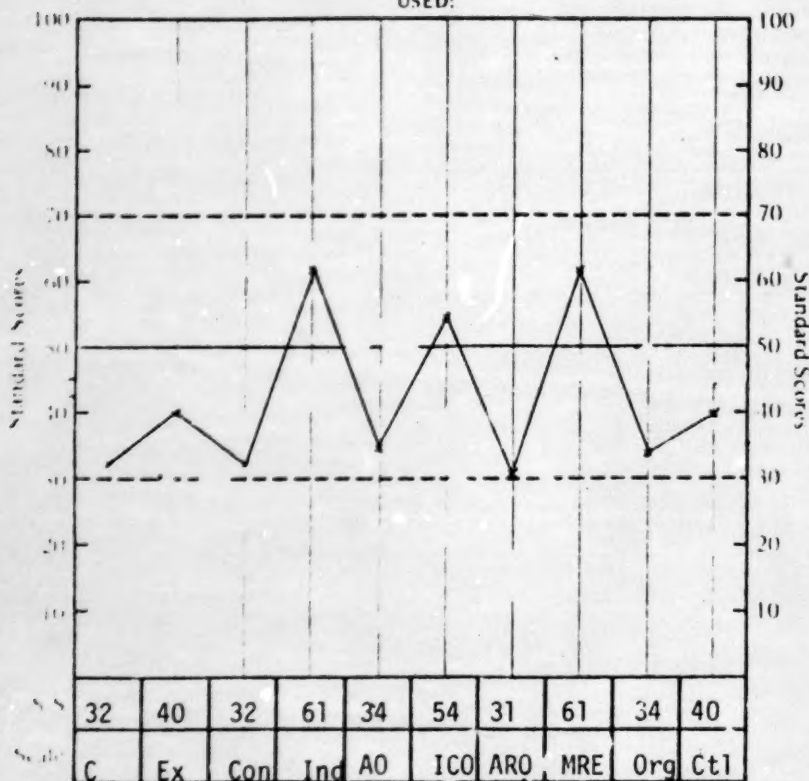
Figure 5: Family Environment Scale Profile: Mother, Family 1

SOCIAL CLIMATE SCALE PROFILE OF

Family 1 - Father

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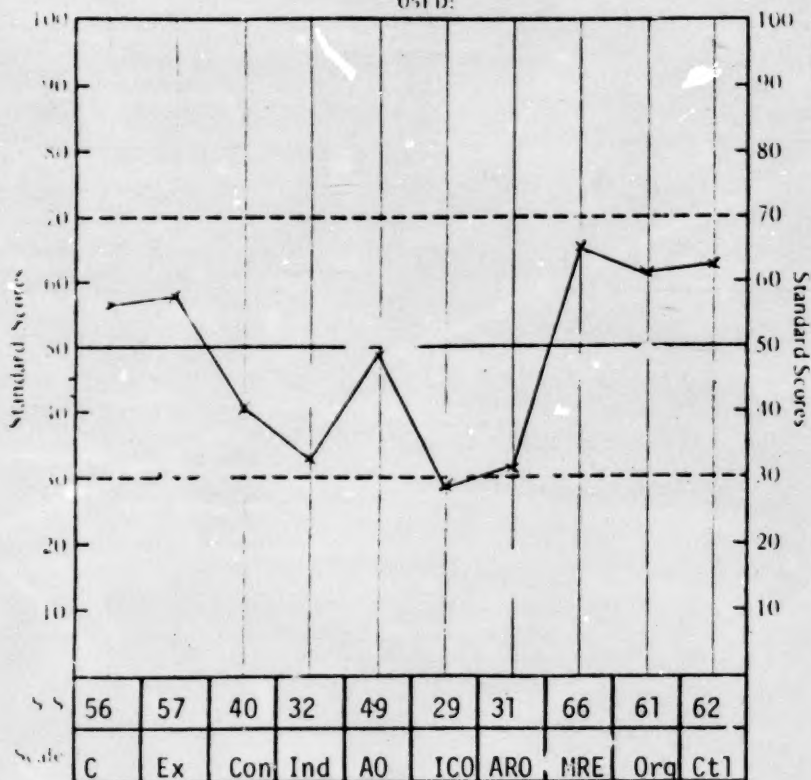
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Figure 6: Family Environment Scale Profile: Father, Family 1

SOCIAL CLIMATE SCALE PROFILE OF Family 2 - Combined

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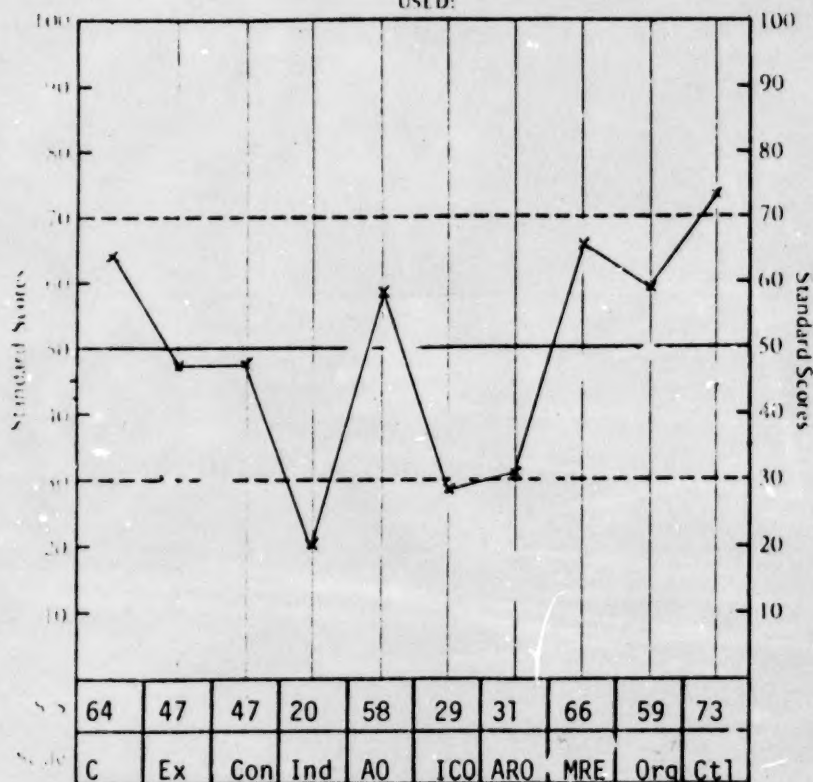
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Figure 7: Family Environment Scale Profile: Family 2 Combined

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Family 2 - Mother

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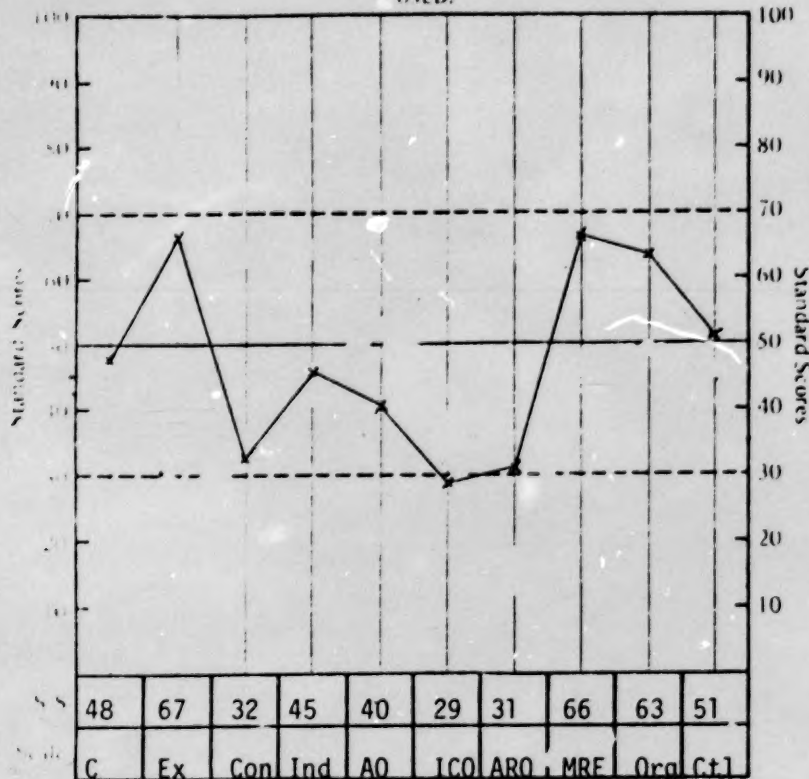
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Figure 8: Family Environment Scale Profile : Mother, Family 2

SOCIAL CLIMATE SCALE PROFILE OF

Family 2 - Father

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Figure 9: Family Environment Scale Profile: Father, Family 2